

Helping Moroccan Women Preserve the Argan Tree at the Gateway to the Sahara



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[Photo: The argan tree is vital to the economy of southwestern Morocco.]

The argan tree, *Argania spinosa*, is a species native to Morocco and the second most common tree in the country. The argan tree can live from 150 to 200 years and is very resistant to drought and heat. It grows wild and profusely in the arid and semi-arid regions of southwestern Morocco, in an area extending from Safi to the fringes of the Sahara and bounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Atlas mountains to the east. There, it plays a vital role in maintaining the ecological balance and preserving biodiversity. Because of its strong root system, the argan tree helps to retain the soil and assists in combatting water and wind erosion, which puts much of this region at risk of desertification.

The argan tree is important to the local economy. Every part of the tree is useable and provides a source of income or food: the wood is used for fuel, the leaves and fruits provide forage for goats, and the almond oil extract obtained by women is used in cooking and traditional medicine. The argan tree thus provides support for some 3 million people.

Deforestation

Unfortunately, in less than a decade, more than a third of the argan forest has disappeared and its average density has declined from 100 to 30 trees per hectare. However, research shows that the argan tree is not a fossil which is disappearing, but rather a tree of the future for certain arid regions. It is therefore vital to improve the argan tree's production potential, so that it can regain its key position in the agricultural systems of the region. This is the challenge faced by two Moroccan researchers — [Professor Zoubida Charrouf](#) of the Faculté des sciences at the [Université Mohammed V of Rabat](#), and Professor Faïçal Bencheekroun of the Institut agronomique et vétérinaire Hassan II of Rabat — as part of a project associated with the 'Network on the Valorization of Plant Materials', funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

While the argan tree plays an important role in preserving biodiversity and combatting desertification in arid regions of Morocco, these are very distant concerns for the impoverished local populations. Therefore, the project aims not only to help prevent further environmental degradation but also to improve the economic well-being of these populations of southwestern Morocco, particularly the women. To achieve these goals, the researchers are focussing on: the development of argan tree management scenarios; the selection of trees that produce large amounts of oils and active biological products; improving the native craft procedures for producing argan oil, studying the physiochemical characteristics, chemical composition, and pharmacological activity of argan oil in order to extend its shelf life and develop value-added products from the oil; the economic viability of the women's groups that produce the oil; and the organization of marketing and training of the women's groups.

Main objective

The main objective of the IDRC-funded project is to enable the researchers to conduct the necessary studies to allow local women's cooperatives to enhance the production of argan oil and to provide technical support to these cooperatives. Funding for the launch of women's cooperatives (shop set up, equipment purchase, purchasing bottles, design and production of labels, training, etc.) is ensured by grants obtained by the Moroccan project leader from various donors including: the Canadian, Japanese, and United Kingdom embassies and the diplomatic corps accredited to Morocco; Oxfam-Québec; the Comité d'entraide internationale; and private Moroccan citizens. Many Moroccan organizations and services have also supported various training activities for the women's cooperatives.

These activities focus on technical training (training women in roasting, extraction, filtration, work organization, bottling and crimping techniques), on professional training (courses in management and accounting), and on personal training (literacy courses). So far, the training has led to some very significant results including: the improvement of Moroccan women's socioeconomic conditions by creating jobs and generating income, making women more aware of their rights, the reforestation of argan forests with the support of the women's cooperatives, and the promotion of regional tourism.

Marketing argan oil

In order to ensure the sustainability of this initiative, it is important to involve the women's cooperatives in marketing their products, which include virgin oil for use in skin care and roasted oil for use in cooking, spreads, soaps, etc. Major efforts have been made toward this end. For example, contacts have been made with potential clients, the products have been shown at trade fairs, retail stores have been opened in the cooperatives, and the products are now available in various supermarkets and stores in Rabat, Casablanca, Marrakech, and Agadir. The project also has a [website](#), which is frequently visited, and the cooperatives are equipped with telephones and fax machines. Moreover, this project has been profiled on the Moroccan second television channel, on the French networks (France 2 and FR3), and on Radio-Canada.

Since his accession to the throne, the new King of Morocco has initiated a policy of openness, which has generated great expectations in the Moroccan population. This policy needs to address the problem of improving the economic well-being of Morocco's rural population, particularly rural women, whose development level is far behind that of people living in urban areas. The IDRC-funded project is a step in the right direction. This is why Professor Charrouf is now holding discussions with other donors to develop a global project on the argan tree.

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If you have any comments about this article, please contact info@idrc.ca.

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